CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

ICONIC POWER

Materiality and Meaning in Social Life

Edited by
Jeffrey C. Alexander, Dominik Bartmański,
and Bernhard Giesen

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Cultural Sociology

Series Editors: Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, David Inglis, and Philip Smith

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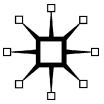

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Preface

That there could be a sociological theory of iconic consciousness, which would extend a strongly cultural sociology to material culture, was an idea percolating in discussions and publications at the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology in the second half of the first decade of the new century. When Jeff Alexander and Bernhard Giesen discovered that much the same conversation was occurring in Konstanz—an overlapping that has often been the case during their decades of collaboration—this mutual project was launched.

It began with two seminars. There was an annual master class in July 2007 at Konstanz University in Germany devoted to "the iconic turn." Jeff Alexander, Gottfried Boehm, and Hans Belting delivered a series of lectures there. Some of the key ideas of the future book were discussed in the debates that ensued, in which Giesen and his students (Werner Binder, Slobodan Karamanić) and colleagues (Valentin Rauer, Daniel Šuber) played a central role. In December 2008, there followed another workshop in Konstanz on "the iconic turn," with talks by Boehm, Alexander, and Giesen as well as Piotr Sztompka and Philip Smith, among others.

After these initial events, the idea of a dedicated volume emerged. Dominik Bartmański, whose Yale thesis was already engaging iconicity and who had been present at both conferences, joined the editorial team. Subsequently, we invited the principal participants to prepare papers for a volume, and wrote to other sociologists whom we knew were involved in this new line of investigation.

We are grateful to Kaylan Connally at Palgrave for her assistance throughout the process of preparing this volume and to Nadine Amalfi, the senior administrator at the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale, for her invaluable editorial guidance and organizational assistance.

INTRODUCTION

Materiality and Meaning in Social Life: Toward an Iconic Turn in Cultural Sociology

Dominik Bartmański and
Jeffrey C. Alexander

With this volume, we push the study of culture into the material realm, not to make cultural sociology materialistic but to make the study of material life more cultural. We introduce the concept of iconicity, and alongside it the idea of iconic power. Objects become icons when they have not only material force but also symbolic power. Actors have iconic consciousness when they experience material objects, not only understanding them cognitively or evaluating them morally but also feeling their sensual, aesthetic force.

The concept of icon has endured across vast stretches of time and space. It represented the sacred for medieval churchgoers a millennium ago and remains central to the technical discourse of computer users today. This extraordinary continuity is not merely casual or linguistic, nor is it a response only to aesthetic need. It has to do, rather, with the cultural structure of iconicity and the kinds of social performances that icons allow to be projected and played.

Whether functioning aesthetically as a pictorial representation of a holy figure (transcendental intelligence) or as a broadly conceived visual interface of a virtual reality (artificial intelligence), icons fulfill the same social role, that of "passing on commandments which are encoded elsewhere to people who are ignorant of the code" (Heidenreich 1998: 85). Theologians and programmers alike are guardians of arcane scripts, codexes that contain intricate information that establishes meanings, directs how things should be run, and dictates which of the script's messages should be made into tangible and visible symbols that are publicly available to believers and users. Medieval Christians and contemporary computer users are equally "illiterate" (Heidenreich

1998: 82; Binder, this volume, pp. 101–102). They have neither invented nor can cognitively understand the scripts according to which the key ritual and strategic actions of their communities are performed. Yet, while they can hardly discuss these arcane meanings, let alone alter them, they can experience and make use of their aesthetic-material representation: iconic forms enable them to live not only an effective but a meaningful collective life.

Icons allow members of societies (1) to experience a sense of participation in something fundamental whose fuller meaning eludes their comprehension and (2) to enjoy the possibility for control despite being unable to access directly the script that lies beneath. Icons are cultural constructions that provide believer-friendly epiphanies and customer-friendly images. There is, then, a historical continuity of cultural orders. The icon has proven to be a powerful and resilient culture structure, and a container for sacred meanings, long after Friedrich Nietzsche announced the death of god.

There is a strong predilection for societies to naturalize their processes of cultural construction. This provides anxious human beings with a sense of ontological security and legitimates ongoing social arrangements, obscuring the arbitrary and constructed nature of social categories. Our aim in this volume is to reverse this process; we wish to denaturalize iconic power. While the contributions are variegated in message, subject, and disciplinary scope, they broadly agree on how iconic processes subtly work. Iconicity is about the interaction of surface and depth. What we experience phenomenologically is a sensible material *surface* that generates its own aesthetic power. This is what Gottfried Boehm, in reference to iconic images, calls the "iconic difference": the aesthetic power generated by the sensual surface of an icon cannot be reduced to what that iconic surface means in the representational sense. At the same time, however, for a material substance to become iconic, its aesthetic surface must, at one and the same time, stand for an invisible discursive *depth* (Alexander 2008). Icons are aesthetic/material representations, yes, but they are also signifiers of the ideationally and affectively intuited signified. In other words, their concrete materiality points beyond itself to the elusive but very real domains of feeling and thought.

It is, paradoxically, precisely because of this ideational duality that icons are practical. Icons provide an aesthetic contact with encoded meanings whose depth is beyond direct ratiocination. Iconicity consists in retrieving, activating, and articulating the depth of the signified by introducing it to the realm of immediate sensory experience, connecting discursive meaning with the perceptual and palpable. Such material conversion is a kind of reduction, or condensation (Alexander 2010b). In such an aesthetic and sensuous compression of meaning, a certain symbolic subtlety is surely lost, but something of great pragmatic import is definitely gained. Iconic compression allows meanings "portability," assuring their citational quality (Bartmański 2011). The semiotic durability of the icon distinguishes it vis-à-vis other cultural elements of social life.

Contemporary icons occupy a wide range of cultural registers. Conventionally, they are associated with visual emblems, from evocative sculptures, paintings, and architectural constructions to sublime scenes from nature, yet the sensuous surface effects of contemporary icons actually range much more widely, to popular songs,

quintessential consumer products, brands and logos, celebrities, and perfumes that evoke lust. It is because they galvanize narratives that icons are not only aesthetic representations but also become full citizens of public discourse. In the iconosphere of society, the meanings of social life take on sensual form, whether by sight, hearing, touch, taste, or smell.

Iconic representations are intrinsic to the struggles of politics, war, and revolution (Binder, Bowler, and Bartmański, this volume), but also to the placid events of everyday life (Woodward and Ellison, Sonnevend, Rauer, this volume). The iPod, for example, is a domesticated icon that evokes latent myths and provides a powerful experience of immediacy in an increasingly mass mediated and seemingly mechanistic world (Bull 2007: 2). So was the Citroen car famously deconstructed by Roland Barthes (2001: 88–90). In the same manner, assembly-line automobiles can be turned into what Dick Hebdige (1987: 73) calls "beautiful one-offs." Describing his neighbor's intense attachment to a Ford Thunderbird, Hebdige wrote about "turning a sign into an icon." Such transformations of discursive into material reality occur all the time. Icons allow us to experience meaning sensuously, and to "control and manage" our experience at the same time (Bull 2007: 4).

The theory of iconicity provides a useful corrective to conventional understandings of capitalist commodification. Because social theory has preferred the trope of disenchantment over totemism, it has either disregarded or stigmatized the metaphorical and emotional power of economic objects. Regarding the relation of objects and humans, contemporary thinkers have become blind to powerful processes of iconicity or stigmatized them within Marxist cultural critique. Even when intellectuals choose to "reconsider" Walter Benjamin's insistence that capitalism eliminates sacrality, for example, they talk about "uniqueness without aura" (Virno 2008: 32). We suggest that it is sociologically more productive to document and theorize the reverse, namely how iconic aura continues to inhabit nonunique items, whether we like it or not.

Societies organize the empirical avalanche of facts into patterns, classes, and types to overcome cognitive saturation and effectively navigate reality. This is an inductive move from the atomistic to the general, from the empirical to the theoretical. Once constructed, however, these types must be exemplified and classified in turn. Iconic archetypes are one of the cultural bits that do this job, embodying meaning aesthetically and allowing a deductive move from the theoretical back to the empirical once again. This circling back and forth between the concrete and the theoretical, the mundane and the aesthetic, the fragment and the icon sits at the core of culture.

But icons exist not only in the *re-* mode—representing, reflecting, refracting. They are also actants, seeming to possess volitional qualities relative to human ways of being (see Kurasawa, Giesen, this volume; also Pels, Hetherington, and Vandenberghe 2002, and Latour 1993). Jean Baudrillard (2001) writes about the "seduction" of appearances, W. J. T. Mitchell (2005) about "what pictures want from us," Boehm about iconic difference. An iconic signifier does not just "communicate" the information of the signified; material surfaces do not simply represent hidden data. Communication as a cognitive conveyor belt is not privileged here. Icons transmit experience. They have their "social life" (Appadurai 1986) whereby

they can accomplish anything from symbolizing "the eschatological hopes for salvation" (Alexander 2010a: 323) to "forging a communal sense of continuity" in the liquid times of late modern transformations (Bartmański 2011: 213). They inspire and invite us to interact with them. Iconic meaning emerges from embodied, sensual impressions, from emotional immersion in the sensual object that confronts us as a thing.

In the history of societies, iconicity in its visual form has often been fervently opposed by moralistic "iconoclasts" who denigrate vision and suppress images. But this has only served to confirm the icon's unique status. No matter how fiercely suppressed, for iconic power there is always an "eternal return."

In the history of social science, icons have not so much been opposed as simply ignored or downplayed. Celia Lury (1998) describes images as the "absent presence" of sociology, and Michael Emmison and Philip Smith (2000) refer to them as an "overlooked domain." The founders of critical social theory, from Karl Marx to Max Weber and Walter Benjamin, have insisted too much on disenchantment. We need to look much more to Émile Durkheim's notion of totemism if we are to capture the enduring parameters of material symbolism and the role materiality plays in social classification and boundary making. The French founder of cultural sociology insisted that "collective feelings become fully conscious of themselves *only* by settling upon external tangible objects" (1995: 421). With this volume, we build upon this classical insight, connect it with contemporary currents in cultural sociology and aesthetic philosophy (see Boehm, Belting, and Giesen, this volume), and demonstrate how a theory of iconic power can be put to work in an explanatory way. We suggest that iconicity allows us to see enchantment as a continuing presence despite tremendous historical change.

Iconic power stems from a mutually constitutive (horizontal), not a hierarchical (vertical) relationship between aesthetic surface and discursive depth. It emerges from their mutual contact, not as a causal sequence but as an intertwining. The logocentrism of modern Western culture (Jay 1994) has downplayed the visual surface, maintaining that it is preceded by depth and, therefore, merely reflects it. Postmodern theory inverts this thesis, downplaying discursive meaning and giving priority to the physicality of surface. Sheer presence (Moxey 2008) and appearance (Baudrillard 2001), the icon becomes an agent of seduction, a purely material actor capable of constituting social audiences on its own terms. If logocentrism unduly represses the surface, postmodern thinkers go too far the other way. Their stance runs the risk of being iconoclastic *à rebours*. Identifying meaning with discourse and reason, and presence with image and emotion, postmodern theory reproduces the old dualisms instead of reconfiguring them.

In this volume, we present iconic power as a bridging theory. Meanings can take nonverbal, nondiscursive forms, and when meanings attach themselves to these forms, they assume not only moral and cognitive but also affective and sensual effects. Meaning and presence, discourse and aesthetics, reason and affect are symbiotic, not mutually exclusive. As Richard Shusterman suggests, "surface and depth are essentially connected complementarities"; "reciprocal in function, they form the fullness of the aesthetic form" (2002: 3). Public discourses, for example, would not be the same without images (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). The enduring presence of

visual metaphors in language attests to the fact that the seen profoundly affects the said. On the other hand, the very fact that we provide pictures with captions and try to verbalize even the most powerful iconic experiences—via such expressions as "ineffable"—underlines the irreducible efficacy of language in making experience intersubjective and thus truly social. It is the feedback between the two that matters (Bartmański, Šuber and Karamanić, Sonnevend, this volume). We need such investigations as the *Empire of Meaning* (Dosse 1999) but also such explorations as the *Empire of the Senses* (Howes 2005).

Barthes (1978: 36) suggests that the distinction between the symbolic carrier and the symbolized is "operational" rather than concrete, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966: 20) that "intension and extension of some signs are not two distinct things." Analogically, sometimes an icon *is* what it stands for, even if it is also more besides. To speak of such entwinement is not to deny that iconic surfaces often appear to have power and meaning in themselves, and that aesthetic surfaces can, indeed, have independent, pragmatic, and material social effect. It is precisely this autonomy of the surface that relativizes the traditional dualism of signifier and signified. The Berlin Wall was a symbol of communist oppression, and also, by virtue of its purely physical form, a material vehicle for repression; it was a perfect material synecdoche of that divisive oppression (Bartmański, this volume). Yet, it would hardly be correct to suggest that, when the wall fell, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) collapsed too. Deep meanings and their material iconization are closely intertwined, but they are not the same. Che Guevara presents a related, if subtly different case. His material form not only symbolized revolution but also—as its powerful aesthetic embodiment—worked to bring it about. For this reason, killing the living person Che Guevara may have helped prevent the outbreak of revolution in a particular time and place. It did nothing, however, to inhibit the expansive iconic representation of revolution in "Che's" material form; in fact, it did everything to inspire it.

Boehm (1994, and this volume) first conceived iconicity in its philosophical form in the 1990s. Mitchell promoted "iconology" in the 1980s and has, for several decades, been attacking iconoclasm and pointing to an emerging "pictorial turn" (1986, 1995). These ambitious theoretical projects in the humanities strenuously evoke the idea of iconic power that does not just bring one more new object of sociological investigation into view. To appreciate the iconic, they suggest, is to think about social construction differently, broadening sociological epistemology in an aesthetic way. Two decades ago, David Hiley, James Bohman, and Shusterman (1991: 1) already observed that "it is now popular to mark shifts in philosophical method and preoccupation as 'turns,'" suggesting that dramatic intellectual shifts involve asking new sets of questions, adopting new research techniques, rescaling perspectives, and refocusing attention. The iconic turn in cultural sociology will involve all of these things.

This Volume

We organize the contributions that follow into four sections. This division is heuristic and does not mean to suggest a logical progression. It seeks, rather, to reveal the contexts and dimensions of iconological inquiry.

The two chapters in the first section make a series of programmatic statements. While each essay addresses empirical problems, the principal aim is to discuss the conceptual apparatus of iconology and to provide broad intellectual contexts within which iconological questions can be tackled. One of the opening questions that Boehm asks confronts squarely the issue of connections between the aesthetic and social aspects of iconicity: Does the power of images belong to a history of taste or to the sociology of audience? Boehm argues that in order to answer this question, one must return to the hard business of clarifying what "representation" is. It is not, according to Boehm, simply about restoring the absent it stands in for, but rather about intensifying it. Representation defines itself by its own boundaries, symbolic and tactile, introducing the "iconic difference," an idea that later appears in chapters by Werner Binder, Valentin Rauer, and Bernhard Giesen. Representation is a "performance of presentation," which not only marks space but introduces temporality. Boehm explains that the physical presence of images allows repeated performance; we can return to see them and thus be reminded of all the meanings with which they are associated. At once stable and portable, images look back at us, and in doing so shed light on the meaning of absence. The visible and the invisible, seen and imagined, constitute each other through endless feedback. In the end, Boehm argues, a science of the nexus of representation-presentation-presence is necessarily a science of performance and experience. This realization transcends traditional boundaries between disciplines and philosophical discourses.

The categories of performance and experience are central to Jeffrey C. Alexander's iconology as well. His main concern is to disclose the constructedness of iconic representations. He observes that the material, humanly molded elements of social life get routinely naturalized as self-evident "things," that is, they are taken for granted as mere objective, external "stuff." Economic efficiency may require and reward such objectification, but it conceals the cultural dimension of materiality. When we succumb to such a vision, we become victims of materialism. Alexander argues that even in its enlightened forms, such as Marxism, materialism severely circumscribes our sociological vision. It blinds us to the significance of the dialectic of sensual surface and intangible depth, reducing objects to mere commodities, and enchantment to fetishism. Instead of materialism, we need to embrace *materiality*, understanding it as a constitutive, symbolic part of sociability. Icons are central entry points to this empirical realm. While his theory of totemism provides an opening, Durkheim himself actually had precious little to say about the aesthetic dimension. By paying more attention to the formal qualities of aesthetic surfaces and to socially constructed circumstances of reception, Alexander shows why iconic objects do not matter equally and why a single object varies in its iconic power. Like Boehm, Alexander sees icons as agentic, relatively autonomous performers. As a sociologist, however, he expands the context of the production and reception of images beyond the question of their aesthetic power to their critical mediation by independent institutional and interpretive power.

Both theorists featured in the first part of the book see iconicity as an emergent quality associated with a series of invisible accretions, performative mediations, and particular temporal structures. The relations between these dimensions are unraveled in greater detail in the case studies gathered in parts 2 and 3.

The second part of the book begins its business where the first leaves off. The contributors look at bundles of visual and linguistic factors that seem to produce the emergent quality of iconicity. News icons rather than artistic creations are the center of attention here. But they are treated as portals to the relevant social processes, not as end points of iconological pilgrimage.

Interpretations of such images inevitably take us beyond the surface of *pictures* to the surfaces and depths of *events*, to singular bodies and powerful crowds, sights and sites, built structures, and symbolically constructed narratives. The subject matter the authors address might be old wine, but they provide new bottles constructed from iconic theory. It is precisely the new prism of iconicity through which the effects of shocking and euphoric events that seem well known can be explained in full. In each author's investigation, visuality figures directly in the creation and distribution of collective effervescence. If icons are indeed stars of the social universe, then sociological analysis provides lenses through which we can better see them. With the theory of iconic power, we can make use of the light of "social stars" to learn new things about the social universe as such.

In his chapter "Iconspicuous Revolution: Culture and Contingency in the Making of Political Icons," Dominik Bartmański revisits the European icons of the euphoric year of 1989 and asks what constitutes a powerful iconic fact. Specifically, he explains why the fall of the Berlin Wall emerged as the icon of 1989 and has retained this symbolic status ever since. The answer is not obvious. The year 1989 was full of epochal events and important figures busy making history. Especially the earlier, politically unprecedented changes in Hungary and Poland had opened up a revolutionary space in which such events like the fall of the wall became possible. And yet they have not attained the same lasting influence on the international audiences. To reconstruct this phenomenon is to tell a story about how the iconic can trump the political. By demonstrating what counts in public perception as "revolutionary," "political signal," and "beginning" and "end" of a social process, Bartmański shows the role that iconicity plays in constituting these key categories and thus in structuring our ability to notice, understand, and remember events. He argues that it is precisely the iconic power of events that turns them into "objective," temporal markers of history.

In the very different context of Russian famine in the early 1920s, Fuyuki Kurasawa continues the project of "denaturalizing what have become self-evident representational conventions." Focusing on the news images of that horrendous event, Kurasawa systematically explores what he terms "regimes of [visual] typification." He explains why certain images were powerful enough to constitute large sympathetic audiences, and how it was that viewers of these famine images initiated one of the first-ever global humanitarian actions. Connecting visual regimes to what Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot call "orders of worth" (2006), Kurasawa demonstrates that these icons of famine are actants, hardly reducible to operations of institutional networks. It was the iconic evocation of collective sentiments rather than instrumental and normative arguments that were decisive in motivating subjects to move beyond a casual sense of pity. Kurasawa shows that, if visual images are sustained by performative work, icons of distant suffering make ignorance and lack of empathy a deeply moral problem, not just a cognitive or emotional issue.

Shocking occurrences can become foundational tragic events, to use Kurasawa's term, in various ways. Wendy Bowler takes up the most iconic tragedy of the last decade, the terrorist attack on New York's World Trade Center, and examines the role of iconic representations. Like Bartmański and Kurasawa, Bowler begins with high-profile visual media representations, viewing them as entry points to an event's tragic narration. Using the analytic grid of Nietzsche's philosophy, she examines how mass media representations of 9/11 seemed to lose the "feeling of reality." As iconic images of events became "detached from the underlying flow of narrative," viewers of the event experienced emptiness, a dark void captured by earlier classical paintings of religious apocalypse.

In the chapter following, Binder puts yet another spin on the iconic constitution of cultural and political shock. Interpreting the cultural structuring of the Abu Ghraib scandal, Binder formulates a formal criteria for the emergence of what he calls "secular icons." Here we approach the notion of icon as sacred text for the "illiterate." Binder argues that iconicity is increasingly significant in the multilingual, globalized, late-modern world, one that has ostensibly lost its grand (verbal) narratives. Not unlike Kurasawa, he demonstrates that iconic performances, and not only deliberative actions, can effectively constitute international communities of moral indignation and political outrage.

The third section further specifies and systematizes the parameters of iconicity. Here not only events and their primarily pictorial meanings are explored but also things and gestures. If iconicity unfolds between communication and experience, under what conditions do these modes of interaction remain powerful in actual social situations? Can there be one without the other? Do they constrain or enable each other?

In "Shifting Extremism," Daniel Šuber and Slobodan Karamanić investigate the communicative and experiential aspects of iconicity within the postsocialist mediascape of Serbia. Drawing on Régis Debray's mediology and on Michel Foucault, they delineate the complex relations between the visual and the political by reference to street art and graffiti. Here the definition of the pictorial is expanded to include gestures and visual performances in the public space of cities. Šuber and Karamanić demonstrate how aestheticization can increase state power, and how, in times of social crisis, iconic symbols attain an almost existential relevance. They also explain how, in the Serbian crisis, particular iconic constellations shifted from the peripheries of political culture to the national center.

In "Visualization of Uncertainty," Rauer continues to adjudicate between communication and experience. Just as icons can crystallize, concretize, and strengthen a sense of belief in certain values, they can also underline uncertainty. To the extent that imagined communities possess their own imagined material constructions, the threat to these icons can bring them face-to-face with what Rauer calls "imagined risks." Because the general public can neither gain direct access to, nor rationally comprehend complex diagnoses of social and natural crises, they need iconic shortcuts. Rauer asks how people perceive the social reality beyond formally and linguistically defined states of affairs. He interrogates visual representations of statistical data that form the body of popularly accessible sociological knowledge in Western media. In contemporary Western societies he

finds that visuality continuously "interferes" with discursive rationality, and often in a productive and fruitful way.

Ian Woodward and David Ellison look at Australia's most famous wine brand, the Grange, in order to substantiate the claim that an icon is the "concretization" of complex culture structures. In contrast with the following chapter by Smith, however, Woodward and Ellison draw attention to the role of iconicity in creating consensus, whether in markets, culture, or politics. Iconic power makes it possible "to endure cultural changes and generate changing meanings across multiple cultural times and spaces." The Grange became an iconic product, not only of a specific industry but also of an imagined national community—the Australians. Woodward and Ellison suggest that Durkheim's totemism explains the meanings of such iconic commodities in a way that Marx's theories could not. Rather than the seeming irrationality and emptiness of commodity fetishism, commodities can "apotheosize" whole classes of aesthetic-cum-moral sensations and feelings.

The third part concludes with Smith's comparative investigation of how iconicity contributes to collective effervescence, if not euphoria, and its divisive capacity. In juxtaposing two very different music festivals, the American Woodstock and the German Bayreuth, Smith shows how the iconicity of both events is informed by charismatic myths and narratives. But the latter are only conditions of possibility. To achieve iconicity, each event also had to establish itself as controversial, not only discursively but visually, which meant dividing large audience communities into diametrically opposed camps of supporters and antagonists. According to Smith, an iconic event visualizes collective feelings via congregations of bodies and assemblies of images and discourses. Icons are cultural performers that, under propitious conditions, can define and crystallize cultural cleavages. As icons include, they may also exclude, which is why "the cultural trajectories of building bridges and building iconicity might at the end of the day be asymptotic."

The final part groups contributions that will return readers' attention to various conceptual rather than empirically delimited issues. It opens with a probing essay by Hans Belting that engages art historical understanding to illustrate the complexities of surface/depth relations. Understanding images not as passive reflections but as active performers that "reciprocate" our looks, Belting calls for a revision of the categorical distinction between the beholder and the beheld. Belting problematizes a series of traditional analytical divides, such as human look versus material image, mental/internal versus medium/external, deficient body versus powerful prosthetic media. Instead, we can profit from seeing images as constituted by acts of looking and bodies as sites of artificial images. Objects, such as masks, may intensify the performative actions of bodies. Both are performers. Body is a living medium, a living image, and also a repository of images.

In the wake of the German tradition exemplified by Belting's meditation, the essay by Giesen provides more general arguments for the claim that emerges independently out of several studies of this volume: iconic power is an "identity-forging power." Giesen suggests that the question of some collective identity is always at the core of the iconic image, engaging with artistic practices from Giorgio Vasari to Joseph Beuys, and from Sandro Boticelli to Max Ernst and René Magritte. Focusing on the cultural iconicity of actual works of art, Giesen describes paintings as entities

capable of marking the transitory stage between the "natural presence" of immediate appearance and the artificiality of purely conventional links between signifying image and referent. He then interprets the figure of the artist him- or herself, that is, the body and mind of a creator, as an icon of heightened subjectivity. In this context, Giesen examines iconic representations of seduction. Iconicity is a mode of enchantment that, according to him, must be taken on its own terms if we are to understand how both early- and late-modern visual representations maintain social bonds.

Julia Sonnevend generalizes such instances of iconicity as visual seduction or commercial enchantment as a "ritual meeting with images." If Boehm and Belting are right that iconic pictorial "performers" look back at us, then encountering them is more like "meeting" than anything else. Moreover, if it is indeed the case that rituals continue to structure modern societies because these societies remain fundamentally committed to performative meaning making (Alexander 2004), then such a meeting with icons is amenable to ritualistic, not just strategic enactments and transformations. But while ritual is one possible outcome of iconic encounters, other less immediate, powerful, and all embracing reactions are also possible. Sonnevend insists that the encounter between actor and iconic image is actually highly mediated. She looks at the contingent effect of the construction of the iconic surface, of the spatial architecture that sets the scene for iconic encounters, of how the presence of others affects iconic contact, and of the ineffable "chemistry" that affects whether we experience an encounter as powerful right now.

Finally, Piotr Sztompka in his chapter "Visible Meanings" places icon and iconicity in the genealogy of related sociological metaphorics that have sparked the imagination of thinkers and societies alike. While Sztompka emphasizes communication more than experience, he evokes the "iconic imagination" as an important new concept for studying social life. He emphasizes that this visual imagination has been fueled by the epochal tool of photography, which has turned the cultural tables of the world. More than just a documenting device or an instrument of aestheticization, photography is a tool for the training of "visual imagination." It has allowed social actors to become gradually more conscious of their surroundings and more aware of the ways the surfaces and depths of social life are intertwined.

In concluding this review of the contributions, we must respectfully demur from our coeditor Bernhard Giesen (Afterword). We find that the contributors to this volume share a broad understanding about the nature of the iconic and how it sociologically works. They give attention both to aesthetic surface and discursive depth. The formal logic of aesthetic images and objects is a matter of continuous interest in virtually every contribution, even as the contributions attend to social conditions and discursive effects. The lay equation of icon with discursive preeminence is a mistake that the contributions to this volume rarely make; the iconic is almost always reserved for only those discursive meanings that also have aesthetic and sensual force.

This is not to suggest, however, that these pioneering contributions to a cultural sociology of iconicity have arrived at a thoroughgoing consensus. Until now, sociology has evidenced hardly any concern for iconicity. This volume marks what we hope will be the beginning of a conversation, and many questions remain. One point of disputation is, indeed, whether the iconic should be reserved for visual

images or whether it can be expanded to the surface and depth intertwinements whose aesthetic impact relies on the other four senses as well. Another unresolved issue is whether the iconic theory applies to mundane material aesthetics or should be reserved for signs that declare themselves in a more decidedly auratic and ritualizing way. If icon does become an important idea in sociology, it will certainly remain a contested concept.

At this time, however, icon is most definitely not regarded as among the key concepts of social science. The nested ideas of icon, iconic power, iconosphere, and iconology have not only been neglected but also deeply misunderstood by the Western intellectual tradition. Part of this unfortunate story is that icons have been conceived as superficial, deceptive, and ultimately even as socially dangerous. Iconic power seems to have scared intellectuals, even as, most of the time, it inspired the ordinary masses of people. Ironically, those who first explicitly thematized the constitutive aspects of iconic power—as fetish, enchantment, and aura—predicted its downfall with modernity, preferring normative criticism to analytic exploration of epistemic cultures.

Our volume challenges this prediction, offering sociological models of strong and vibrant iconicity and showing how a theory of iconic power provides new explanations of taken-for-granted social facts. Marshall Sahlins (2000: 12) has warned that "all functionalizing arguments bargain away actual content for presumed effect, what culture is for what it does, thus giving up of what we know about it in order to understand it." Such a move "forecloses any serious interest in the *ways* different peoples have meaningfully constructed their existence" (italics ours). To explore the iconic way of constructing meaning is the aim of this volume.

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Part I

CHAPTER 1

Representation, Presentation, Presence: Tracing the Homo Pictor

Gottfried Boehm

The Image as Fact and Act

Cultural practices related to images have always been both about craftsmanship and about the domestication of powers assigned to images. We were concerned with the mysterious *effects* of images way before we started to celebrate the genius and glory of *artists*. This is supported by ethnological and archaeological findings as well the history of religion. Myths, fairy tales, and stories of living and punitive images also give way to the reconstruction of old assessments. If we take these sources literally, they seem to conceive of images in analogy to living beings: they attribute something like a "power spirit," emanation, and charisma to the physical body of the artifact. And, not least, they seem to endow images with the ability of a benevolent or vicious look. These kinds of images were respected, revered, or even feared.

The recurring iconoclastic attacks on images and the accompanying criticism of images were not able to render the discourse of the power of images obsolete. An enlightened audience will no longer permit itself to be frightened by living images, and it takes a Mozart to make the intervention of a stone guest appear acceptable. But the same audience is captivated by the magic of magnificent paintings and speaks about the paintings' unique, more-than-physical "presence" (German: *Präsenz*). The linguistic usage is vague, but "presence" seems to mean something else than mere physical "being-at-hand," (*Vorhandenheit*); it describes an enhanced presence (*Gegenwart*) of the image, which reaches beyond historical, referential, or documentary functions. It is certainly correct to assume that individuals have a psychological need for these kinds of attributions. The long history of art and taste gives an account of the swaying and even downfall of several types of assumptions about

"presence." Does the power of images belong to a history of taste or to a sociology of public audiences? The fact that individuals endow images with living presence cannot shift the notion of presence away from our reflection about images. Even if we deem images not only as facts but also acts, as meaning-making objects, we will get back to the relationship between presence and representation. As Georges Didi-Huberman (1992) demonstrated, it is not just the finding of psychology but also of meta-psychology that something we look at, also looks back at us. When the viewer experiences the presence of the artwork, she is experiencing a being-there (*Dabeisein*) in an emphatic sense. This is beyond a subjective sentiment or a projection of mere preconceptions. Nothing constrains her experience of being completely taken in. The phenomenology of experiencing images provides us with many hints that it is "presence" that opens up the experience and not the mere decision of the person who absolutely *wants* to see. This holds true even more if we do not reduce images to a secondary status in which they merely repeat in visual or tangible form what was already expressed by cognitive means in a better and more verifiable way. Treating images as representations marks a factual and theoretical buffer zone (*Schonstufe*), which allows no one to approach the phenomenon of "presence." However, it always remains methodologically questionable to speak about *powers*, because we recognize powers only in *effects* that were triggered by the powers themselves.

Presence/Absence

Regardless of these complications, the relationship between presence and representation is deeply engraved into our reflections on images. Leon Battista Alberti is a typical and telling example of this, because he relates a lot of old rhetorical knowledge and thinking to distinctive humanistic and scientistic intentions. He understands presence as a forceful power of active representation, which he illuminates with reference to the social phenomenon of friendship. Paintings contain a truly divine power, but this power differs from friendship, which makes people who are far away present to us. The power of images is even greater: paintings make the dead seem still alive after centuries. Thus, we repeatedly and joyfully look at the painting and admire the painter (Alberti 1972). The attendance of the absentee and the vanished is both the evidence and the biggest achievement of presence. This is, of course an altered presence: it is certainly not a palpable resurrection of the dead. The image is neither a ghost nor a double, and nobody confuses an image with the represented reality. But we allow ourselves to be taken in by that representation, and only this "representation" is able to show the liveliness of the absentee in a believable way. Alberti clearly distinguishes between two aspects. From the perspective of cultural history, there is a remembrance-related aspect and an artistic one. Using the concepts of image reflection, he connects the ability of representing the absentee to the self-presentation of art or image. The image displays something, and in doing so it displays itself. And as a result, the work of art addresses the viewer in a special way; it triggers pleasure and admiration in the viewer and mediates the experience of being taken in.

But how does re-presentation generate presence? What is the relationship between the various terms in the title of this text? If we take the perspective of Alberti, the

prefix "re-" refers neither to mere repetition nor to reanimation. But what is then the meaning we assign to "re-"? The depiction certainly does not replace the thing it makes visible. Re-presenting is not about presenting something again. It is less and more at once. The depiction underbids what the depicted was or is, because it is completely confined to the possibilities of canvas and color, stone or bronze. The depiction also outbids the depicted, because it lends the enduring status of liveliness to the depicted, who long ago departed or crumbled into dust. The depicted becomes present only via the image: the image defines what the depicted is and can become. Thus, the prefix "re-" in "re-presentation" means *intensification*. This intensification adds a surplus to the existence of the depicted. According to this conception, the divine power—mentioned by Alberti—would be the ability to create existential growth (Gadamer 1986: 149). Presumably he thinks about the representational power of portraits. The enlivening of the dead is naturally emphasized in the sculptural gravestone, where indeed very different modalities of presence can appear: such as the *représentation au vif* and the *representation de la mort*, and it can also involve the dead as decayed (*transi*), the mourners (*gisant*), or a different type of depiction or a mixture of depictions (Panofsky 1964: 86f.). On the edges of sepulcher art we can still see actual representations: the skeleton of the saint, possibly attired in his own clothes, which—presented as an iconic enactment in a church—represents what it stands for, showing him, for instance, as an powerful and generous local patron of a community. The liveliness shifts from the artistic depiction to the invisible powers of grace. Because the representation refers to the physical materiality of the body of the absentee, the absentee becomes present in the presentation: one could almost say, he "is" the presentation.

Regardless of the particular content and the related religious, legal, and ethical interests and roles, this is about making the absentee present. By continually representing the body of the absentee—the body can be in any state: dignified, glamorous, or even putrescent. The representation withdraws the absentee from temporal succession and thereby gives him a place in the world. *Re-presentation* occurs as *presentation*. The presence owes its existence again to a special type of "showing." Therefore we can regard re-presentation as an *act of showing*, which has a particular temporal dimension at its disposal. Representation has the particular ability to present the represented that was originally subject to the passing of time, as if it were present. Thus it receives presence by the representation, and this presence possesses evidence or *enargeia* (Boehm 1995: 31ff.).

But what do we mean by "withdrawing the represented from temporal succession?" What exactly does the depiction do, when it gives presence to those who are dead or absent? Are the rules of entropy not applicable to iconic representations? Do representations that are themselves material not succumb to the order of materiality? Of course they do. It is thus not the avoidance of succession and decay that makes the representation outstanding from a temporal point of view. We always know that the represented person *has* lived. What actually makes representation temporally outstanding is related to the ability of showing: the representation prompts the viewer to return, and it presents the depicted at once as itself and continually as new and different than itself with all its memorable traits and exemplary characteristics.

The "divine power" of images to which Alberti refers and which is able to provide even the dead with presence is definitely not just about the mere power of depiction. We frequently even assign a legal rank, "legitimacy," to representations. The term *representatio* is deeply rooted in the legal sphere, apparently because of the idea to make the represented legally subsumable in the act of representation (Hofmann 1974). A weaker reflection of this legal status is the photo on our identification cards. It is the decisive touchstone, the thing we actually show others to prove a verbally asserted and modified identity and to effectively confer the established rights on the holder of the ID. The photographic portrait makes the person identical with herself—many have had to experience this at border crossings. In the history of photography, we can see how old models of representation can be kept alive and refined, such as the private "memorial photography," the family album, which is a genre, among others, that Roland Barthes extensively investigated (Barthes 1980).

The Boundaries of Representation

Representation ties itself to absence and death. It responds to and gains the gloss and power of its presence through the transparency of transience and void. This is all based on the binary code of presence/absence. The image is the dialectic reaction to the fascination and anonymity related to death. The most exquisite characteristic of the image is to give a face to the absentee and the departed and to even provide her name with a look and a presence. The European culture tends to expand the collection of images and thereby also the realm of presence. Initially, it was limited to simple monuments of stone, and later on it was monumentalized in pyramids or used ritually in temples. Then it appeared in peripatetic thinking spaces like the agora and the *museion*, even later in the chain of representation of sanctuaries, in cemeteries, and finally in museums. The boundaries of presence have been constantly extended. If we consider the current tendencies of image production, it seems that the space of presence will continue to grow, while we are going to repress the space of absence even more. In the brave new world of simulation, there is even an effort to abolish the space of absence entirely. The idea of presence possesses the features of a cultural utopia, which tries to realize itself with the help of all sorts of organs. If we were going to be able to reproduce the human genome in a proper way, the gap between the depiction and the depicted would be closed and people could become their own representations and their own lasting monuments.

But this myth of reclaiming a this-worldly Paradise at last makes clear that the relationship between presence and absence, representation and the nonrepresentable requires accurate definition. Presences constantly emerge and vanish. Presence has to be generated perpetually even in the most stable works that have been with us for thousands of years. For instance, we might award the role of witness to a mere—e.g., prehistoric—relic, but certainly not yet grant presence to it, because it is entirely identical with its material substance. But if we call the depiction an act that outbids this fact, which is its basis, then the verbal form "representing" is implied by the substantive "representation" as its actual driving power. Therefore the point is to uncover this inner motion. It has to do with temporality. The act of showing is temporally determined, even when it evokes outside-the-world or